

Alternative cinema in the 80s

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In 1953, six years into the anticommunist witch hunt in Hollywood and the culture industry, John Howard Lawson, former president of the Screen Writers Guild and member of the Hollywood Ten, summed up the Communist Party's experience of actively working in a limited but significant way in a major capitalist entertainment industry. After describing the overt government campaign against the left in Hollywood, which dramatized the struggle for ideological control of culture, Lawson called for the creation of a truly independent alternative, not

“the independence of film producers who are somewhat grudgingly allowed to exist on the fringes of the Hollywood industry, using money borrowed from the big banks and dependent on the system of distribution and exhibition controlled by the Big Money. Production which is independent in a creative sense must be free from monopoly control, free from the class domination of the bourgeoisie, and — this is a condition which is in some respects the most difficult to guarantee — free from the ideology of the dominant class.” (*Film in the Battle of Ideas*, p. 117)

Lawson's conclusion, that the main task for radicals is to build a media culture outside of the commercial system, remains valid today. While developing a left and feminist analysis of Hollywood and TV continues to be an important concern, it is also clear that radicals cannot gain significant influence on, much less control of, any mass-market filmmaking short of a socialist revolution. To the extent that Hollywood moves in a progressive direction from time to time, it is in response to active mass movements. Jane Fonda, Ed Asner, Robert Redford, and Jill Clayburgh have space as creative and public figures because millions of people are ready for a drastic change in U.S. social and political life and not the other way around.

From the start, JUMP CUT has been committed to supporting alternative film and video making. Because of that and our ongoing discussion of independent work in every issue, it's somewhat artificial to have a "Special Section" to call attention to the topic. But stopping here between past and future articles and interviews provides an opportunity to discuss several concerns that shape JUMP CUT's work in independent media.

While there's always been agreement within JUMP CUT about the importance of alternative film, we've never put forward a specific "line" about what kinds of independent work and what modes, forms, styles, topics, and issues are most important. While different writers and staff people have certainly had strong opinions about those issues, it has always seemed most important to provide an environment for active dialogue. In an editorial in JUMP CUT No. 3 (1974), John Hess and I indicated some of the issues we thought were pertinent then:

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"This issue contains an interview with and an article by people working in independent political filmmaking, a subject that JUMP CUT will continue to explore in future issues. The views presented certainly don't exhaust the range of the subject, but they offer some obvious contrasts.

Following the French general strike in May-June, 1968, Jean-Pierre Gorin became Jean-Luc Godard's partner. The two have pursued a revolutionary form to match an explicitly revolutionary content, and they have produced the most controversial political films of the past six years. Cine Manifest is a new group working in San Francisco, coming to terms with their diverse experience in film and radical politics and trying to create progressive new films for the mass audience.

Despite their differences, these filmmakers are engaged with the same problems of subject matter and treatment, relationship to the film audience, and defining who that audience is, or should be — all of them, finally, political questions.

In this context it's useful to raise another question, or rather to recall one raised several years ago by Norm Fruchter about left media work. In an article in LIBERATION (May, 71), Fruchter, who had worked in a Newsreel collective, made a number of criticisms of the way the movement of the 60s dealt with the media. One criticism that radicals had drifted from direct organizing into one form or another of propaganda work: the underground press, research groups, printing efforts, and the Newsreel collectives. Although these groupings shared the larger political and organizational problems of the left at the time, they also took on their own characteristic form. Often the work at hand required only a small working collective, was task oriented, involved strong primary relationships with each other, accentuated political discussion, and had an absorbing, rotating division of labor. The positive

achievement of this form was to define a style of collective and participative work — and frequently a context in which questions such as personal elitism and sexism could be raised, and sometimes fruitfully dealt with. However, the collective tended to function as well as an isolated group, defining itself and its media work in a "we/them" dichotomy, with no direct contact with "them" — the people they were trying to communicate with. As Fruchter stated it,

“Almost all propaganda work is a way of doing political work without directly facing or confronting a constituency ...”

The criticism remains with us today, whether the filmmaker is an individual or a collective. In many ways the problem is aggravated by the decline of the mass movement of the 60s, when at least one could feel that a political film was going out to the “movement” where it would be used and where it would aid people in motion. Today that national organized movement is much harder to identify. Where it appears it is largely engaged in one kind of educational work or another — essentially the making and distributing of propaganda — or in service work, except for scattered local struggles for power. Which is to say, we're in a different historical moment, and the same basic questions have to be answered in fresh terms.

Film in and of itself is not a viable way of breaking out of this relative isolation. Film appears as a finished product, a totality, with the result that documentaries or films of political analysis appear more coherent and unified than the original situation was, and the makers appear, in turn, more certain — and unfortunately sometimes more rhetorical and dogmatic — than they really are. Movies are essentially private and reflective, passive individual experiences. And to equate the viewing experience, however intellectually engaging, with political action, is false ... At best, political films can only have a limited effect when operating without a direct relation to ongoing political activity. To paraphrase the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo, people become revolutionaries not from ideas they learn, but from lived experience.

But, dealing with these problems cannot be based on singing the “Where Has the Movement Gone” blues. We have the opportunity now to learn from the lessons of the past, explore the realities of the present, and establish a relation to audience and constituency that goes beyond the already radicalized — who were, all too often, the exclusive audience for radical media in the past. For a radical today, using one's skills making films might be, but does not have to be, “a way of doing political work without directly facing or confronting a constituency.” Fruchter's criticism is still pertinent, but it must be responded to with the creative tension of working with a constant awareness of and commitment to a constituency. Two questions about one's work go a long way to keeping it from being an escape: “For whom?” and “For what end?”

Cine Manifest argues for films that combine a left perspective with a

popular narrative form already familiar to the mass audience, while Gorin and Godard believe that traditional forms themselves negate radical content. This question has been the most hotly discussed one among political filmmakers and critics here and abroad in recent years. One solution to the question has been offered by some feminist filmmakers in the United States. They have shown it is possible to reach new audiences — in women's groups, libraries, and public schools — with films that combine personal statement and political analysis with experimental and innovative means. We do not have a formula for the best kind of political filmmaking, but we can see that answering the questions "For whom?" and "For what end?" is a necessary step. The fact is that there are political struggles which filmmakers can relate to and audiences who need their films."

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JUMP CUT has changed over the years. We began with five editors fresh out of years of graduate school in Bloomington, Indiana — not exactly a place where you could see a lot of independent film. Only one of us had filmmaking experience at that time. Today almost everyone on the editorial board and staff has had some experience in making films and tapes. For several years, about half the folks involved are actively making independent work. We've also changed through meeting many film and video makers, seeing lots of new films and tapes, and being involved in discussions of the key issues. While we haven't given up analyzing the dominant cinema (after all, you can't escape it), we've grown in our commitment to and understanding of a radical alternative.

At present two different but related activities are needed to develop and strengthen an oppositional film and video movement in North America. First, those concerned must expand their horizons and see that it is important to bring together, in whatever ways possible, the largest number of people who are committed to opposing Reaganism in all its forms. In political terms, this is the task of building an effective resistance coalition. A fragile version of this emerged at the Alternative Cinema Conference in 1979 when 400 radical media people gathered to discuss common concerns (see reports in JUMP CUT Nos. 21 and 22).

The Alternative Cinema Conference marked the clear emergence of new forces and new faces. Feminists, black and Third World people, gays and lesbians came forward as the cutting edge of fresh thought and committed media work at the meeting. We saw a broader spectrum of alternative efforts, including anti-nuke and environmental work, community-based video, and new projects in distribution and exhibition. Generally speaking, almost all the conference participants gained a new sense of the complex interrelations between financing, production, distribution, exhibition, criticism, and also the relation to ongoing organizations and movements for social and political change. In the wake of the conference, however, people were unable to create a

sustaining organization.

Today, JUMP CUT remains committed to providing a forum for the central issues of alternative cinema, a place for the voices of filmmakers as well as critics, an arena for discussion by a wide range of people with different political analyses and programs. Of course, JUMP CUT is only one part of a larger movement concerned with building a radical media culture.

A broad-based alternative media movement must have effective mechanisms for presentation and discussion of political principles and differences. A lowest common denominator situation will stagnate without the discussion that allows for growth and change in the face of new experience. Yet such an effort can be fragmented and reduced to silliness and acrimony if it is only a forum for sectarian squabbling. The challenge of promoting a healthy exchange of ideas on a wide range of aesthetic, political, and practical ideas must be met to provide growth and development for individuals, groups, and on a national level. At present such discussion takes place erratically at best. There are few national or regional conferences which genuinely bring together activists and artists, makers and distributors, academics and organizers, anti-nuke folks and labor militants, blacks and Latinos. Yet, obviously all these people and many others have much to gain from getting together and building alliances, sharing information, increasing mutual support, and pushing for common goals. Among publications, only *Cineaste* and JUMP CUT have worked consistently and extensively to cover and discuss the situation of alternative media from a left perspective. And both have self-admitted limitations in doing the job and are open to a variety of legitimate criticisms. Clearly, much more needs to be done.

The development of objective conditions which create the space and energy for a resurgent progressive movement is taking place at a key moment in the history of U.S. media. While multinationals and conglomerates are increasingly taking control of the entertainment and communication industries, a vast technological change is taking place with the appearance of cable and subscriber TV, satellite communication, video recorders, interactive computers, and a whole range of new items and processes which prefigure a very different media future, even if no one seems to know what that future is.

In the sixties, in response to a mass movement and an urgent need for communications independent from the capitalist press and media, the underground press blossomed into hundreds of local papers which capitalized on the existence of bargain basement printing technology. For all its problems, erratic nature, and often short-lived existence, the underground press provided an immensely creative grassroots response to an urgent need. Combining art and politics, visuals and prose,

information, entertainment, satire, cultural discussion and political analysis, it was a vital element in local and national activity. Today we have the technical potential to make and distribute video materials in an equally creative way. Will it happen? It's probably too early to predict, but it certainly is an opportunity that shouldn't be missed if it can be brought off.

Building an oppositional media in the eighties is an immense task. Yet it is absolutely crucial to the development of the entire spectrum of progressive forces: workers and the poor, gays and lesbians, blacks, Latinos and other oppressed minorities, feminists, students, and youth who face unemployment and militarism, and many others. We live in a literate mass media and mass culture society that increasingly concentrates power and control in the hands of the ruling capitalist class. Communication, education, information, entertainment, and other functions of the opposition movement must use contemporary means and find new forms for today's contents. It's a challenging prospect, but it's also an exciting one, which calls for creativity, imagination, hard work, commitment, individual growth, and group interaction. We need only compare the possibilities of radical media work today with the deadly fit-in-the-slot orientation of the dominant media to decide which side offers cultural workers a better future.

It's in the context of a growing political movement and new challenges for radicals that we present the articles in this Special Section. Lynn Garafola surveys the emerging progressive feature movement with an eye to its potential problems and successes. In an interview with D.E.C. Films, the leading Canadian distributor of movement media, Margaret Cooper investigates the practical politics of distribution. Two recently widely seen films provide the opportunity for in-depth reviews as Doug Eisenstark discusses the anti-nuke feature documentary, *WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS*, and Sue Davenport looks at the radical history film about women workers in World War 2, *ROSIE THE RIVETER*. Expanding the usual range of radical concerns, Claudia Gorbman critiques an autobiographical experimental film, *SUSANA*, while Gina Marchetti and Carol Slingo consider avant-garde filmmaker Sharon Couzin's work. Concluding the survey of alternative cinema, Clyde Taylor provides an overview of recent black independent film.

Taken together, these articles mark many of JUMP CUT's major concerns in alternative media. Future issues will continue our commitment to reporting, analyzing, and building an independent media culture as part of the movement for radical social and political transformation.

